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ABSTRACT

Two papers that examine how to assess students' work in this age of electronic information sources include: "Students on the Net: Enhancing Learning through Authentic Assessment" (James Henri); and "Assessing Students' Work from the Net: An Impossible Dream?" (Paul Lupton) The first paper notes the problem of parents doing students' work, and presents a case for using authentic assessment to provide a reliable measure of students' understanding. Because of its emphasis on real-life learning and reflection on that learning, authentic assessment changes content and teaching strategies. The key to authentic assessment in the age of the Internet is to relate learning tasks to the real world of the student. The second paper examines what constitutes work which can be assessed as an accurate indication of legitimate student work, irrespective of the original information sources, or means of publication. After outlining three principles of assessment, the paper suggests some whole-of-school strategies which can be employed to monitor student use and application of information resources, including electronic information. The role of the teacher-librarian is also discussed. (AEF)

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TOPIC F

WHAT STUDENTS PRODUCE FROM THE NET:

ASSESSING THEIR WORK

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STUDENTS ON THE NET: ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

James Henri
Senior Lecturer, School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University,
Wagga Wagga, N.S.W., Australia

When we were young learners, chances were we took school work home. Our teachers wanted us to undertake extension work, to prepare for a test, to finish off something we had been doing in class, or perhaps to allow us the opportunity to put together the project of the century. Now if we were fortunate we had a parent who was able to help us. Perhaps we even had an older sibling at the same school who could pass on her/his treasures, together with the teacher's comments. Of course we always did most of the work ourself and therefore our excellent grades were an accurate reflection of our own learning. In our formative years, information was prolific, as it is today. Not only were we skilled at getting things right, we knew where to find the right things. We were resourceful. Even when we had no support we were outstanding.

What annoyed us was the fact that many of our peers used to do as well (or almost as well) as us. This was not because they were as smart as us but because someone else was doing their 'at home work' for them.

I always reckoned that it was unfair that kids parents could do their work for them. It seemed to me that these parents had already had their chance at school. Why was it though that the teachers who taught these kids every day and who must have known that these delights could not possibly produce such minor epics by themselves, continued to give their parents and siblings such glowing reports -- just who were they teaching?

I noticed that my sports coaches were far smarter than most of my teachers. A coach could always spot parents who were trying to relive their childhoods through their kids sport. Coaches did not appear to pick kids on the strength of a parent's reputation. The coaches knew that there were parents in the wings who could probably defeat the opposing team single handed. Yet they picked teams on the basis of the kids' ability and how they learned about the game week by week rather than on the proven ability of a parent.

The advent of the photocopier had a major influence on the quality of work that parents could send in to be marked. First, the photocopier cut down the amount of time that was needed to reproduce the pearls of wisdom that parents could invariably locate. Second, kids who knew about osmosis were able to learn so much more effectively by photocopying huge chunks of books and magazine articles and carrying them about in their bags. The more adventurous would place them next to their beds at night so that the transfer of information could occur when the brain was not otherwise engaged.

In more recent times the arrival of the PC, and associated technology such as CD ROM, increased the opportunities for time saving in the learning process. The ability to cut and paste, to network, and to desktop publish has provided the impetus for dramatic growth in the homework cottage industry.

The advent of the Net, and in particular of the WWW, has extended all of the opportunities for out of school work as well as providing teachers with access to resources that provide the opportunity to significantly enhance in-school work. While the Net provides many rich possibilities for student learning it magnifies the problems highlighted above. (Interestingly I know of one school that has responded to the problem by requiring all homework to be handwritten!!)

de Bono (1987) makes a telling distinction between scholarship and thinking. Scholarship is about reporting on what others have done, whereas thinking is about analysing the work of others and creating a personal meaning or application from it. Do teachers want to encourage scholarship or thinking or both?

Used effectively, the Net provides rich opportunities to create personal meaning, through the processes of exploration and focus formulation. The student explores and forms a focus as s/he moves from seeking relevant information to seeking pertinent information. One can imagine that as the information seeker becomes proficient in the skills of searching on the Net that traditional information tasks that once took weeks might now be completed in a matter of minutes.

The availability of the Net raises significant equity issues. Students who have access to the Net outside school have a significant advantage over those who do not. Should this advantage result in better grades? And again who is being assessed, the student or someone else?

Traditionally, assessment has focused on measuring the quality of the content that has been amassed in response to a question or problem and the way that this content has been presented. The advent of new technologies and the accessibility of multimedia through the Net has meant that a third grader can now put together the definitive work on dinosaurs, or government, or Inuit peoples, or black holes in a few minutes without stopping to think. Furthermore a group of students can significantly reduce their workloads and/or increase the quality of their output by exchanging information or by collaborating on assignments. Not only can students attending the same school do this, but so might students joined across the globe.

I'm not suggesting that collaboration corrupts or that it is not a good thing, but if teachers do not reassess the ways that they recognise and reward student learning then schools are in trouble. It is a truism that what is rewarded will be delivered. This applies to assignments as much as it does to anything else in life. If presentation rather than content is rewarded, students will concentrate on presentation. If process rather than content is the focus of assessment then effort will go into process. If originality is regarded as more important than accuracy, effort will go into being different. So what should teachers assess in this age of the Net?

The point of assessing students sometimes gets lost. We assess students to identify what progress they are making with their learning. Effective assessment will provide appropriate information that will allow the teacher to identify strengths and weaknesses and facilitate appropriate interventions. This means that where possible assessment should be concerned with product as well as process and it should occur during as well as at the conclusion of the learning task.

The process of assessment should not be considered as an after thought but rather should be considered at the point of instructional design. The teachers assessment plan influences the rest of the instructional plan. Diez and Moon (1992) suggest that the following questions determine the assessment plan: What do we want students to know and be able to do? What will count as acceptable performance? How can we ensure expert judgement? How can we provide feedback?

Authentic assessment is designed to provide a reliable measure of a students understanding and may encompass a range of techniques including testing of key concepts, observations, ratings, interviews, questionnaires, and performances. Within this paradigm students become much more involved in the assessment process. They contribute to decisions about what is important and what part of their achievements should be measured. Because of its emphasis on real-life learning and reflection on that learning, authentic assessment changes content and teaching strategies. Teachers become more reflective about how their instructional practice is facilitating learning, and about how well their assessment instruments are measuring that learning and motivating students to want to learn. In the best situations teachers give up their role as a 'director of traffic' and become involved in the learning process. This blurring of the distinction between teaching and learning provides the teacher with a powerful window into the learning milieu. Barth (1990:49-50) makes the powerful observation that:

> Just as potters cannot teach others to craft in clay without setting their own hand to work at the wheel, so teachers cannot fully teach others the excitement, the difficulty, the patience, and the satisfaction that accompany learning without themselves engaging in the messy, frustrating, and rewarding 'clay' of learning. Inquiry for teachers can take place both in and out of the view of students, but to teacher and student alike there must be continuous evidence that it is occurring. For when teachers observe, examine, question, and reflect on their ideas and develop new practices that lead toward their ideals, students are alive. When

teachers stop growing, so do their students. Unfortunately, schools are seen as places where children learn and adults teach.

The key to authentic assessment in this age of the Net is to relate learning tasks to the real world of the student. When students see that they are not involved in 'busy' work they can be better motivated to learn. Process must be given equal weight to product and students must have some control over the way they reflect upon their learning and on the way it is measured. To the extent that students identify their teachers as learner role models, they are likely to recognise the value of learning as opposed to the value of grades.

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James Henri is Senior Lecturer in Teacher Librarianship at the School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, N.S.W., Australia. James may be contacted via email at <jhenri@csu.edu.au>.

ASSESSING STUDENTS' WORK FROM THE NET: AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

Paul Lupton
Lecturer, School of Languages and Literacy Education, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove Campus, Red Hill, Queensland, Australia

INTRODUCTION

In asking if assessing students' work generated by using electronic sources, including from the Internet, is an impossible dream I am perhaps hinting at the notion that there is no such person as an original author. Certainly the application of information technology to a piece of writing can mean that the reader is not to know whether the source of the writing is that of the assigned author or whether the work is the result of an electronic sleight of hand. The advent of easy access to electronically-based information has perhaps accentuated a problem which has always been a worry for teachers, viz. is this a parent's work, from World Book, or from the Net.

THREE PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

This paper aims to examine what constitutes work which can be assessed as an accurate indication of legitimate student work, irrespective of the original information sources, or means of publication. My thoughts on this are shaped by three underlying principles regarding assessment. The first is that assessment should always be part of the learning process of a unit of work; and stemming from this, that the major part of assessment should be completed at school. The third principle requires that there be agreed criteria on which the assessment will be based.

While exploring these principles in more detail I will suggest some whole-of-school strategies which can be employed to monitor student use and application of information resources including electronic information. In all of this I will be suggesting that the processes adopted by schools follow the well-known principles of learning which require a developmental, sequential approach. To achieve this, schools need to adopt assessment practices which can be consistently applied irrespective of current or future information platforms.

SCHOOLS MUST BECOME ELECTRONIC CENTRES

The developments in and rapid take up of information technology require schools to critically examine their position on student use of electronically generated and stored information. This can no longer be postponed as the following indicates. Out of the commercial, governmental, educational and domestic market it is the home market which is currently the fastest growing sector. Of the computers sold to the home, the majority are equipped with CDROMs and now are increasingly being equipped to access Internet. Indications from the USA are that many computers shipped at Christmas time will be equipped with basic videophone hardware and software. Not only will students be able to communicate with experts via email, this additional feature will enable them to converse with and see them in real time.

ASSESSMENT: PART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

If we take the view that assessment is part of the learning process, and hopefully we do when we link assessment outcomes to unit objectives, then the assessment piece for a unit of work becomes a cumulative process during which the various inputs are monitored, both in terms of student achievements and to provide data for further teaching/learning activities. Thus we are not only monitoring student progress, we are also obtaining feedback on those areas/skills and processes which require further work to ensure student mastery.

An approach which successfully monitors student progress on an assessment item is to build in several check points related to the planned content, concepts, skills and processes. As students move through the levels of schooling, the monitoring of progress at these checkpoints becomes increasingly devolved to the student. Thus, in the early years much of the monitoring is teacher-directed. Later, this is supplemented with a combination of peer and self-monitoring until in the final years of schooling much of the monitoring is self-directed. Decisions on this monitoring process need to be made by each school community so that a uniform approach reinforces and develops the process as students progress through their schooling to the extent that autonomous learning becomes the norm rather than the exception, which would appear to be the case for many students who present themselves at my university.

What I am suggesting here is a process which develops learners who go through the stages of being dependent and then independent before becoming interdependent. This approach has the potential also to develop self-confident students who value and acknowledge the input of others, be they fellow students, teachers, or found sources of information. I am suggesting also that school communities must develop a corporate view of assessment which ensures consistent and complementary approaches predicated on developing positive student experiences and outcomes.

ASSESSMENT: A SCHOOL-BASED PRODUCT

If a school's assessment policy states that students must be given sufficient time and access to resources to ensure a satisfactory level of achievement, as is the case in at least two Australian education systems known to me, then this can lead to some useful spinoffs for students. I suggest that while there will be less assessment done it will be more focussed, as much of it is done in class time, and also that there is a better chance of equity as all students have access to the required resources. An additional spinoff for students should be that, if their learning is being monitored in the ways suggested earlier, then there is a better chance of errors and misconceptions being picked up before the final assessment piece is marked. It follows also that teachers who adopt this process are in a better position to design more relevant student-centred learning experiences and to respond to student needs as they occur.

Implicit in this mode of operation is the requirement that schools be equipped with sufficient resources to support the assessment requirements of all students and thereby ensuring that all students are equally advantaged. It follows from this of course, that those setting assessment must ensure the adequacy and appropriateness of the resources.

ASSESSMENT ACCORDING TO AGREED CRITERIA

Students respond to being given increasing responsibility for their learning. They certainly welcome the opportunity to define assessment tasks and to agree on what represents fair criteria for grading. In keeping with the earlier remarks on developing autonomous learners, it is important that students have a clear understanding of what the assessment criteria requires of them, whether that criteria is jointly decided or prescribed. As use of another's work requires proper acknowledgment there must be criteria on which to judge fulfilment of this practice. Use of such criteria specifically acknowledges to students that it is normal to use the work of others in developing one's point of view on a topic. This practice will remove the absurd notion that all student work will be their own.

INCORPORATING ELECTRONIC INFORMATION

The following suggestions for monitoring student use of electronic information sources in their assessment introduces another requirement for teachers, that of familiarity with those sources which are key to the learning and assessment tasks. Implicit in this is the notion that teachers are knowledgeable not only in the content of their teaching areas but also of the relevant resources for that area. Thus, in addition to selecting traditional information sources, teachers will need to familiarise themselves with those resources which are increasingly available in electronic form.

In the case of Internet sources, a useful strategy being increasingly employed by schools is to establish Home Pages for each curriculum area or year level. Specific Web sites are 'attached' to these curriculum or year level pages and students are required to restrict their searching to these sites. This practice is not only pragmatic, it is also ensures equity of access.

A second strategy continues the practice used by learner-centred teachers who encourage their students to present their assessment in various modes. This has lead for example, to audio-visual presentations in addition to the traditional forms of presentation. The use of student Home Pages is a natural extension. Thus there needs to be the facility, training and encouragement for students to publish their work on the Net via their own home pages.

These are just two strategies which I'm sure will be added to by the conference participants.

A CONTINUING ROLE FOR TEACHER LIBRARIANS

While teachers are essentially responsible for their students' learning outcomes, there continues to be an important role for teacher librarians and from this stems an important responsibility.

As information literacy specialists, teacher librarians input to student learning will necessarily be related to advocacy for and support of the implementation of a model of the information process which is consistently developed across the curriculum and year levels. Part of this approach should also involve the inclusion of check points in assessment tasks to monitor mastery of the steps in the information process, a process whose skills continues to expand as the modes of information delivery expand.

The resource provision role in this electronic era presents a major challenge for schools. If schools aren't providing access to the wealth of electronically generated and stored information, then many homes increasingly are, as I indicated in the introduction to this paper. This challenges teacher librarians to become strong advocates for the need to establish adequate access to electronic information sources to ensure that the learning environment is commensurate with the needs of the learners. In turn, teacher librarians will require access to suitable professional development opportunities.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have adopted a proactive position on the use of electronic information by students for their assessment. I can see no other way forward as students will access the Net for their own purposes and therefore will wish to use it to complete their learning tasks. The challenge for school communities is to develop positive responses to the electronic media to ensure that their students become responsible, autonomous learners who are able to be critically literate with information, irrespective of its format.

There is no place for a piecemeal approach, rather without there being a planned and consistent approach to the use of computer based information, schools will be failing their students.

Once again teacher librarians are given an opportunity for leadership in this area of student learning. Will the chance be let slip by?

Paul Lupton is a lecturer with the School of Languages and Literacy Education at Queensland University of Technology - Kelvin Grove Campus in Red Hill, Qld. Australia. Paul may be contacted via email at <p.lupton@qut.edu.au>.